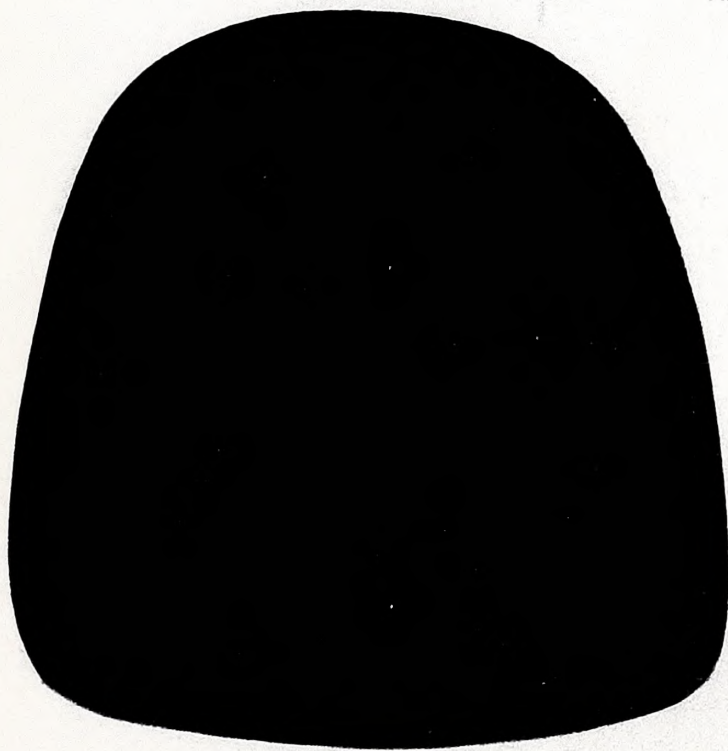


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Jene Highstein

February 10 - April 21, 1996

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art
Winston-Salem, North Carolina



Introduction

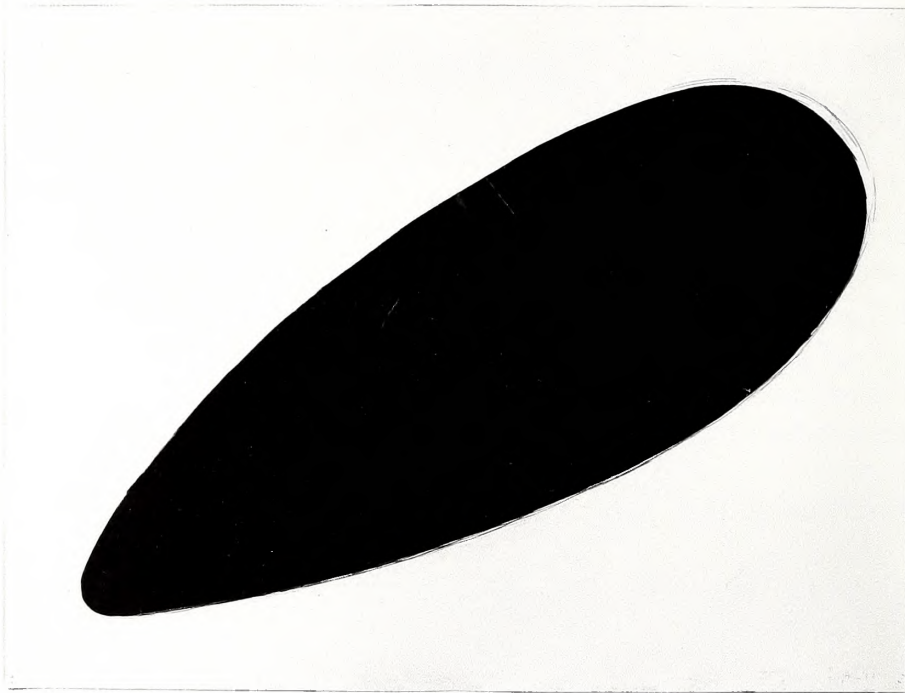
Best known for his monolithic three-dimensional sculpture, Jene Highstein has spent more than two decades quietly creating a body of drawings that constitutes a dialogue between these two very different media. Closely related to his sculpture, Highstein's drawings are nevertheless complete and finished works. While some are clearly studies for sculptural pieces, others simply share a common vocabulary of minimalist forms—linear, elliptical, moundlike, and conical. With their dense and often massive shapes, Highstein's drawings belie the ephemeral nature of their media. They are clearly created by a sculptor.

SECCA is honored to present the first museum exhibition of Jene Highstein's drawings, highlighted by related sculptural pieces sited on SECCA's grounds and galleries. For SECCA, the exhibition also provides an opportunity to fulfill two critical goals: presenting comprehensive bodies of work by important and often under-recognized midcareer American artists; and expanding the public-art program for SECCA's thirty-two acres of parkland.

A number of staff helped to organize this exhibition. Former SECCA curator Bruce Lineker coordinated the initial phase of the project and worked with Jene Highstein to develop the concept of the exhibition. When Lineker left SECCA to become director of The Light Factory in Charlotte, North Carolina, SECCA curator Jeff Fleming worked with Jene and I to bring the project to fruition. Essayist Marjorie Welish has contributed an insightful essay on the drawings, for which I offer SECCA's thanks. Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to Jene Highstein, whose patience and professionalism made this endeavor possible.

Funding for this project was generously provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. SECCA is supported by The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, and the North Carolina Arts Council, a state agency.

Susan Lubowsky
Executive Director



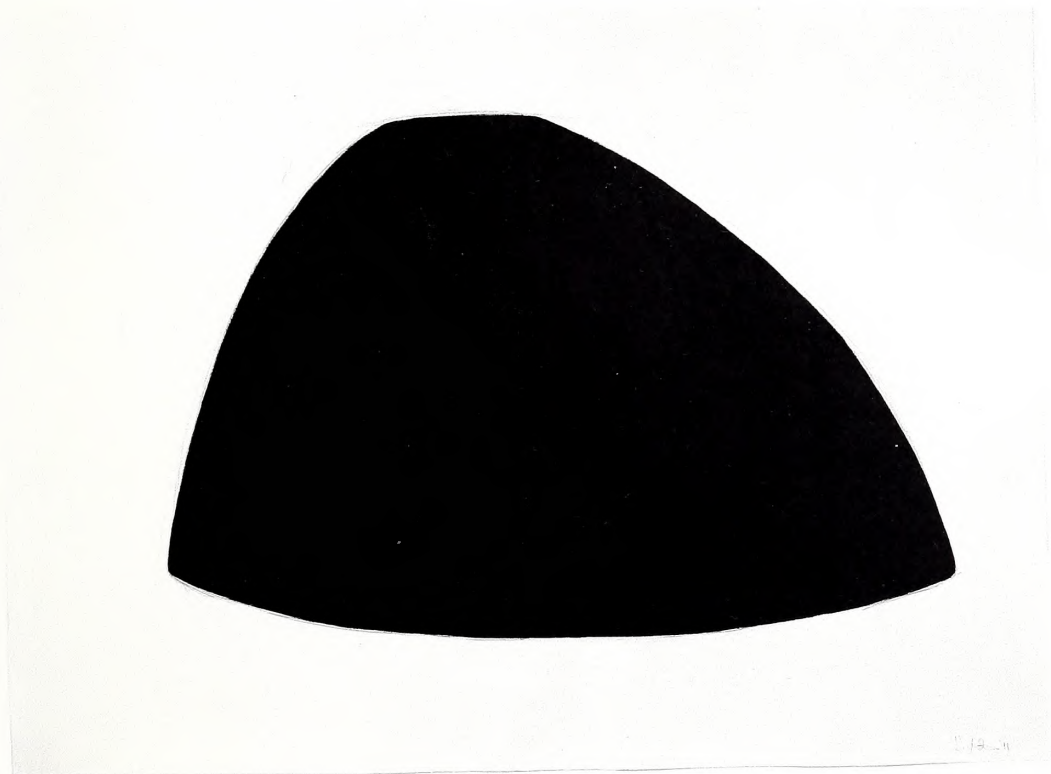
Flat Iron, 1987

Boulders from Flatland: The Drawings of Jene Highstein

"Pardon me, my lord," replied I; "but to my eye the appearance is as of an Irregular Figure whose inside is laid open to view; in other words, methinks I see no Solid but a Plane such as we infer in Flatland; only of an Irregularity which betokens some monstrous criminal, so that the very sight is painful to my eyes."

Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland*

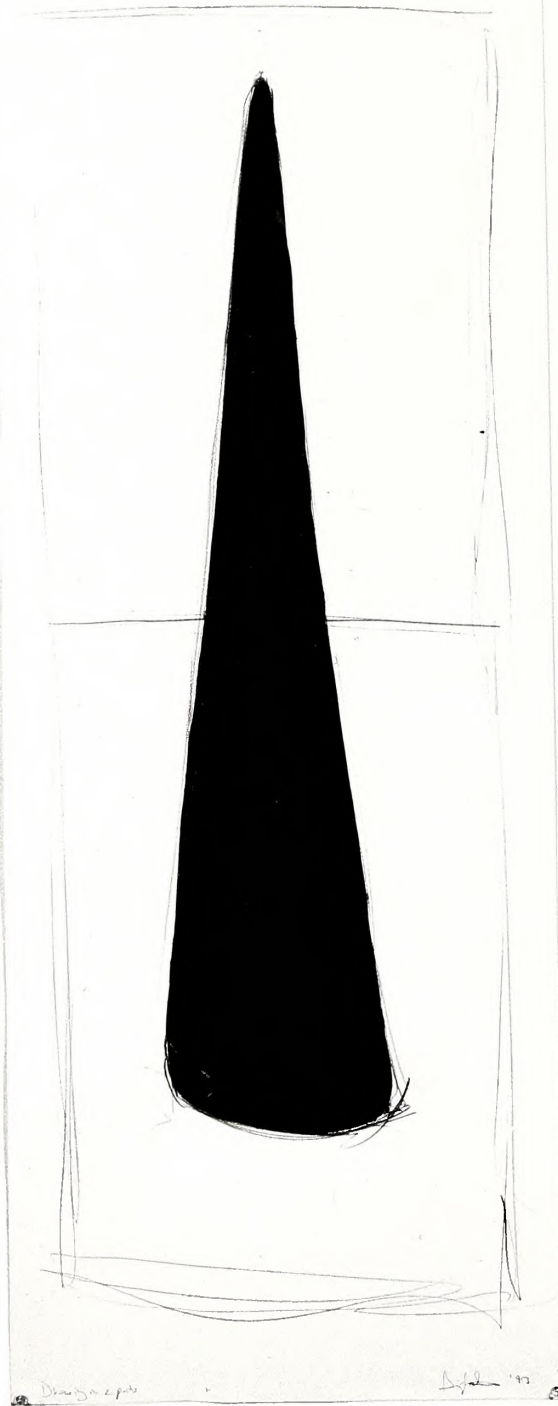
To us, the inhabitants of Spaceland, viewing perspectival rendering of the innards of cubes is not a horrific experience, for we have become accustomed to the conventions of drawn space. Similarly, from our third-dimension vantage, drawings related to sculpture may not be painful to the eyes—even though the



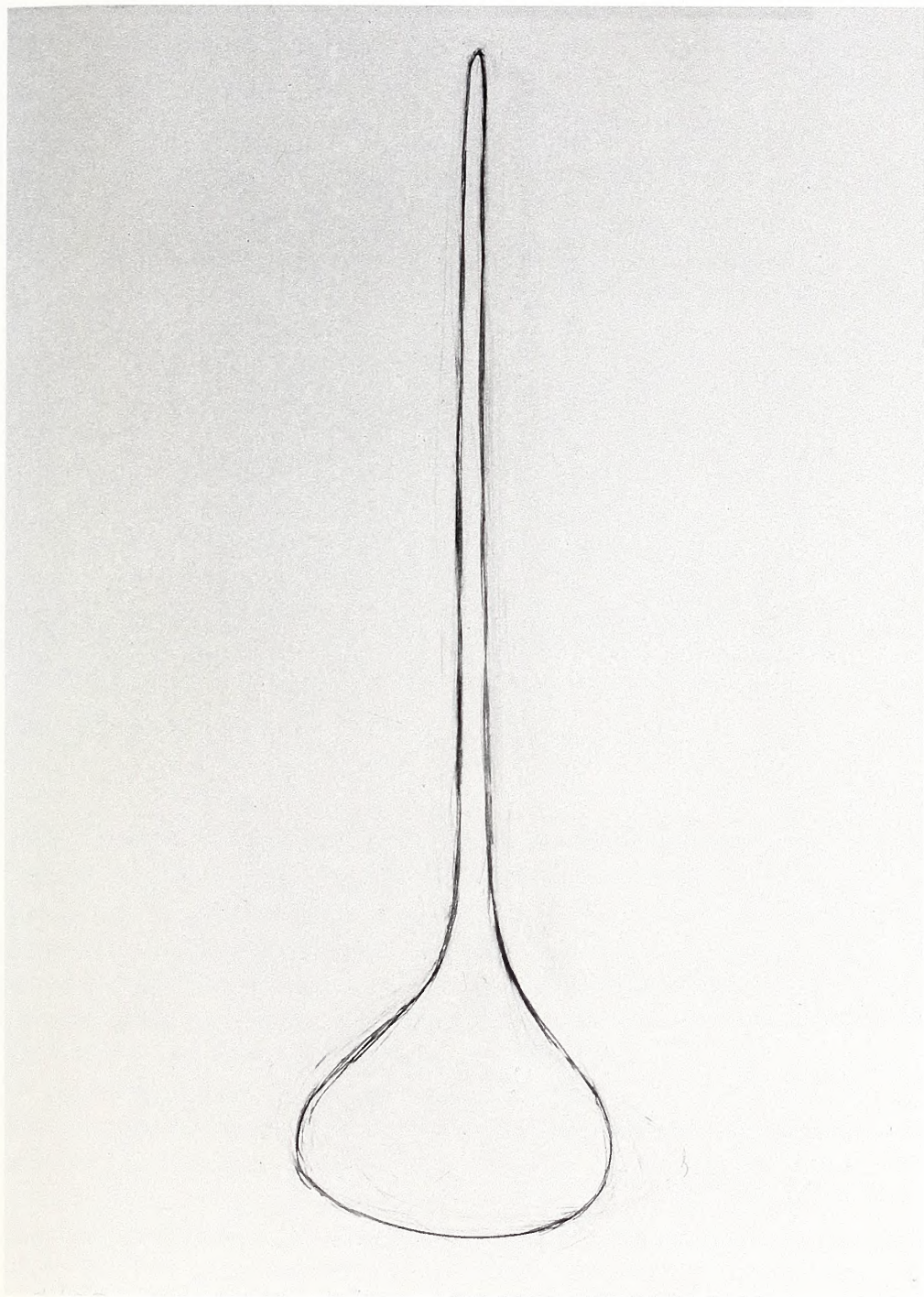
Large Spider Mound, 1991

shift in seeing them as distinct from the sculpture may require adjusting to the learned conventions of seeing flat. While drawings are optical experiences, sculptures are tactile. Then, too, drawings are often only approximately analogous to their sculptural counterparts. Free drawing, which has no model, requires further that we forget the relation of drawing to sculpture altogether, for some drawings do not correspond to three-dimensional things.

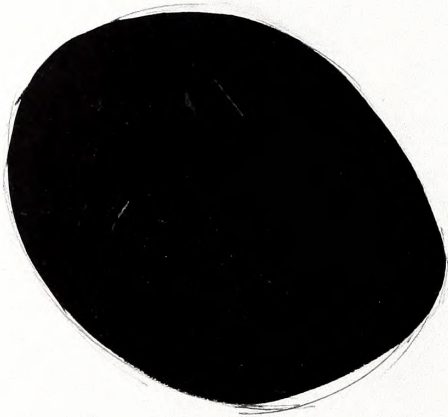
Jene Highstein's drawings reveal an approach to shape approximately analogous to the morphology of his three-dimensional things. A Flatlander would be relieved to know that the conventions of perspective are "noninvasive" in Highstein's drawings and do not penetrate flat forms to show the "intestines" of a cube's or ovoid's interior. Almost all of Highstein's forms remain densely opaque silhouettes. Matte black pastel or watercolor fills the shape entirely; little if any modulation of surface reveals itself.



Model of Two-part Drawing, 1993



Study for Palm III, 1988



Untitled—Sphere, 1982

On the other hand, the contours reveal an irregular geometry. Approximating ovoids and polygons, Highstein's handhewn shapes, while not quite rustic, identify an intuitive approach to shape meant to produce simple, nameless things. Large spots or areas, many taut with respect to the negative field they occupy, sit in space. Among the most tantalizing of these are drawings in which the so-called positive figure and negative ground assume the status of paradox: the black figure apparently a black hole of absorptive power; the white ground engulfing the black hole. Formally, these drawings shift in weighted and weightless paradoxical equilibrium. Like lumps and mounds in section, the "positive" areas are not shaped to refer to actual objects, however. That is to say, in ways that language philosophers would note, a number of Highstein's images depict decidedly general shapes—shapes that are perceptually distinct but referentially elusive. Among the most compelling of all his works, such images retain their namelessness and neutrality. Ultimately, Highstein's work reveals its strength in drawn and sculpted lumps and mounds that are rudimentary without being primordial.



Small Spider Mound, 1991

Highstein's sculpture can be identified with fundamental things—a sort of nature on the cusp of acculturation. Whether his choice of material is bronze or wood or stone, the phenomenological content of his boulderlike mounds seems coincident with a Heideggerean “setting forth the earth.” Made of stone, yet less monumental than most cultural presences, Highstein's sculpture challenges the assumption that sculpture is necessarily “macho.” Although boulders and stone in nature may “express” the entire range of phenomenological presence, Highstein prefers to construe both large and small works recessively, passively—innocuous to the eye, more like stones in the road than like the peasant's sabots.

The cultural equivalence of modesty applies to the drawings as well, but the drawings are unlike the sculpture. Highstein models the surface of his sculpture with point-by-point care, honing the entire three-dimensional shape, but he reduces his drawings to silhouette, so shaping them requires care applied primarily to the silhouette's boundaries. Highstein's hand may be found, as

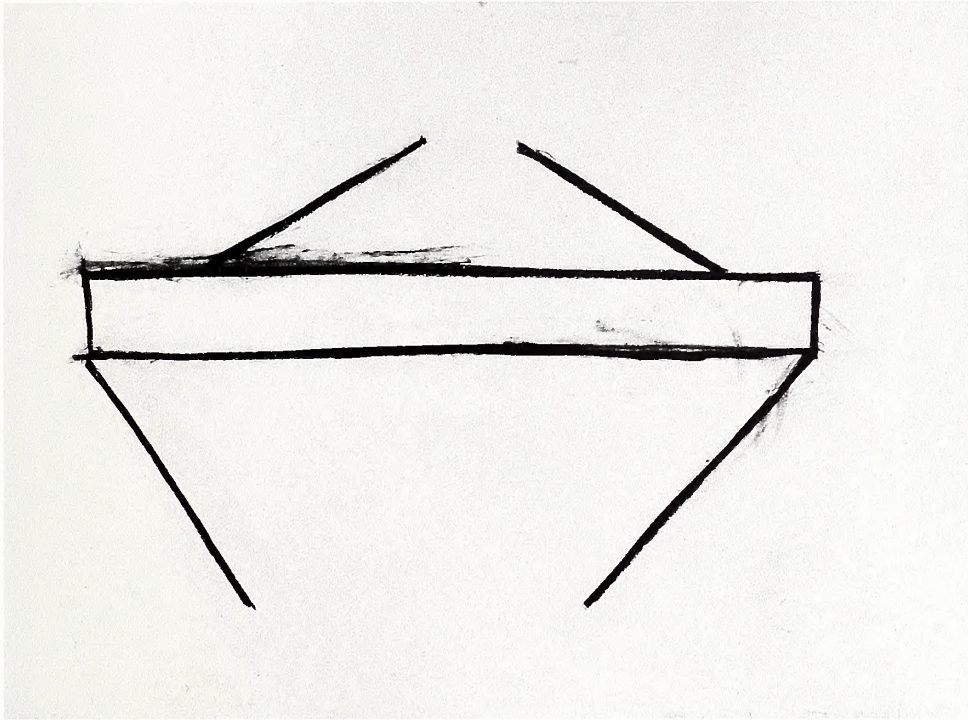


Double X's, 1973

Heidegger would say, "tuning" the contours.

With his simple shapes adjusted edge to edge, Highstein's drawings relate stylistically to modern American "functional" abstractions done in midcentury. Comparison with the American artist Myron Stout comes to mind. With their graphite deposited and accreted in a slow synthesis of form, Highstein's drawings, like Stout's, register an aesthetic that values morphological modesty and presence through attuned form. But work is less intensive in Highstein's unprepossessing form; struggle is not the issue. And in this sense the two-dimensional lumps and mounds Highstein draws occupy space, but do not overwhelm it. Highstein seems more interested in keeping matters on an even keel.

Highstein's sculpture is stylistically linked with early modern art; its visual language is entirely at ease. The aesthetics of positive and negative interpenetrating form, the equilibrium induced through asymmetry of modified geometric shapes, the presence of nameable imagery even as abstraction is advocated, the



Untitled, 1973

reductive visual language—these modern traits are as characteristic of Highstein's sculpture as they are of sculpture from Brancusi to Hepworth and Moore.

It is in this sense that Highstein's work is minimal. As John Graham defines it, "minimal" art arrives at essence through a process of gradual distillation of manifest material. Whether mere "thing" or refined and abstracted actuality, Highstein's images are minimal because they emerge gradually, having been shaped into simplicity. Brancusi would recognize these as essences. The truncated ovoid in Brancusi's *Torso of a Young Girl*, for example, is fundamental to the form vocabulary of Highstein's boulders and mounds. Brancusi's *Flying Turtle* wittily defies the viewer's expectation of sculptural gravity, poised as it is on its curved—not flat—side. Highstein's *Flying Saucer*, too, balances on its curvature. Highstein's drawings reveal the imagery and a recollection of early modern thought.



Bent Form, 1993

In style, then, Highstein's work has much more in common with intuited essences than with the intellectual rationale for renovating sculpture as an art-historical category. The later Minimal art of the 1960s, arguing for an intellectual renovation of art history, displaced Graham's earlier notion on minimalism, and the Minimalism of Donald Judd's logically generated volumes or even Robert Morris's phenomenologically calculated slabs and enclosures exist in an entirely different realm from the sort of shaped essences that John Graham noted in 1937. Highstein emerged as an artist in the early 1970s, when Minimalism had already ceded its vocabulary of perception to the next generation, and artists' onsite interventions were conspicuously understated. Instead of logical constructs or heroic objects, the protagonists were now space and environment and milieu.

Highstein's drawings from the early 1970s reflect the collective wish for such a deliberately understated intervening presence. In an untitled drawing, two vertical lines occupy the diagonal axis of the page. (Coincidentally, a Highstein

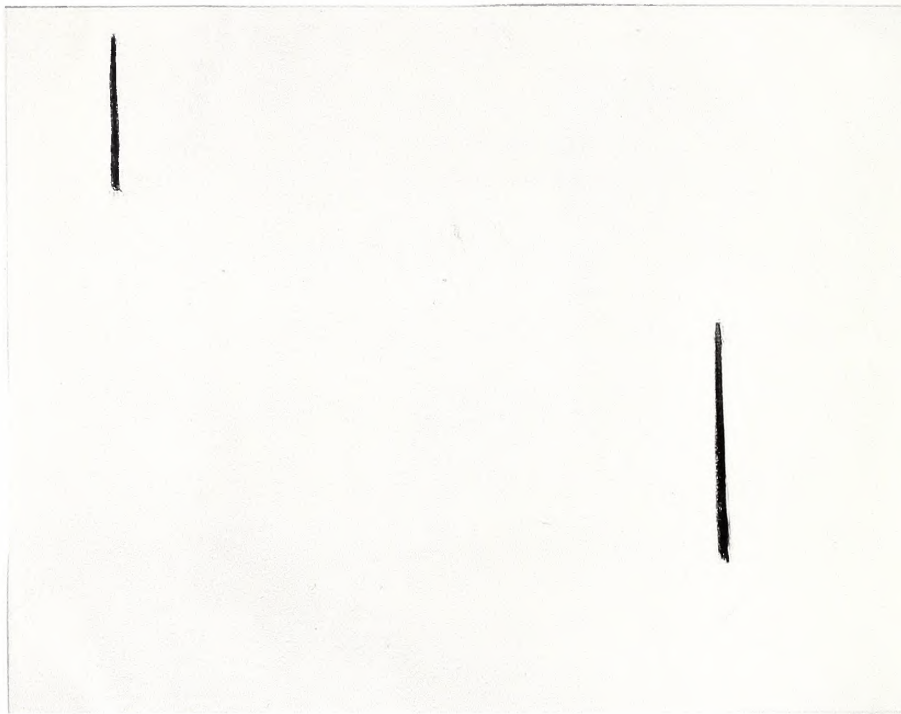


Untitled—Iron Casting, 1986

sculpture merely occupied a vacant garage by situating vertical poles at either end of the space. Less aggressively than Richard Serra would have proposed in precariously situated lead or steel material, Highstein's poles were concerned with adjusting the already available space for perceptual visibility, and so, with cultural reclamation.)

Some of Highstein's line drawings are passive in this way; others deploy line differently, including an early drawing in the collection of Richard Nonas. Splayed from a rectangle are lines we infer as depicted planes, and these simultaneous views of "top" and "bottom" help to describe the cubistic illusion implicit in an ensemble of lines.

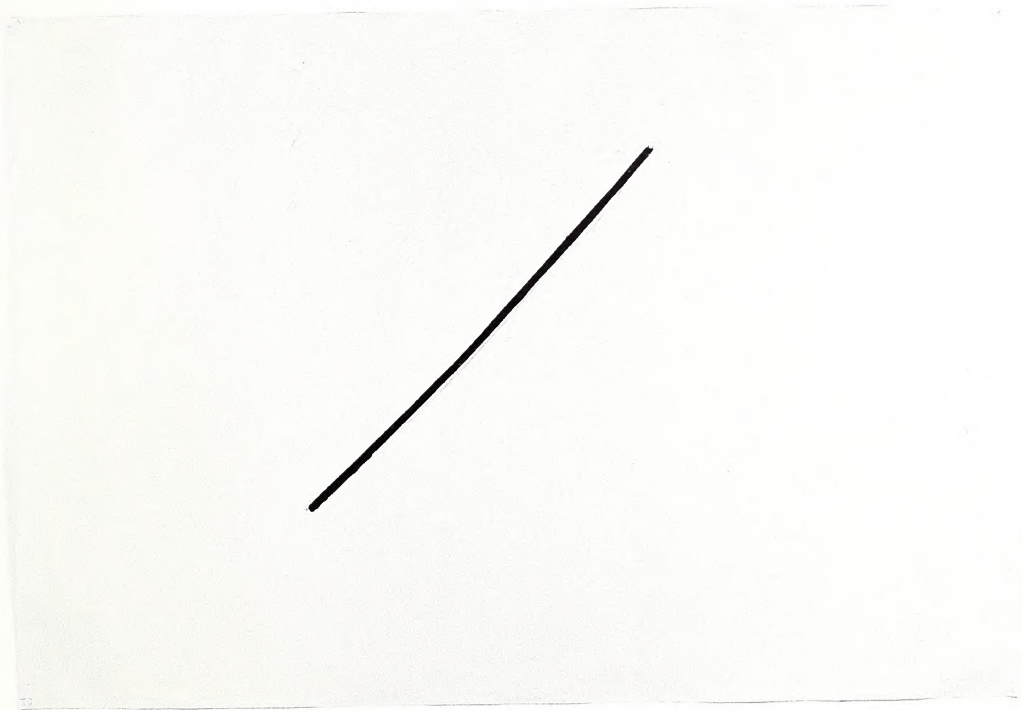
By the late 1970s, solid planar mounds that derived in part from early modern geometry, in part from anonymous sculpture found in country and city, preoccupied the artist, and his drawings reflected these preoccupations. Anonymous forms attractive to Highstein include such urban features (in this case, common-



Two Verticals, 1973

place in Italy) as granite mounds set at discrete, regular intervals, closing a street to vehicular traffic. These barriers to all but pedestrians articulate the street by indicating permeable boundaries. Adapted as sculpture by Highstein, these mounds could be considered some of the artist's contribution to Minimal art's prefabricated functionalist logic, were it not that Highstein shapes them by hand and so reclaims them for attuned essentialist form. *Totem*, as he titles a drawings of such a mound from 1979, submits Minimalism to the aesthetic of modern minimalism.

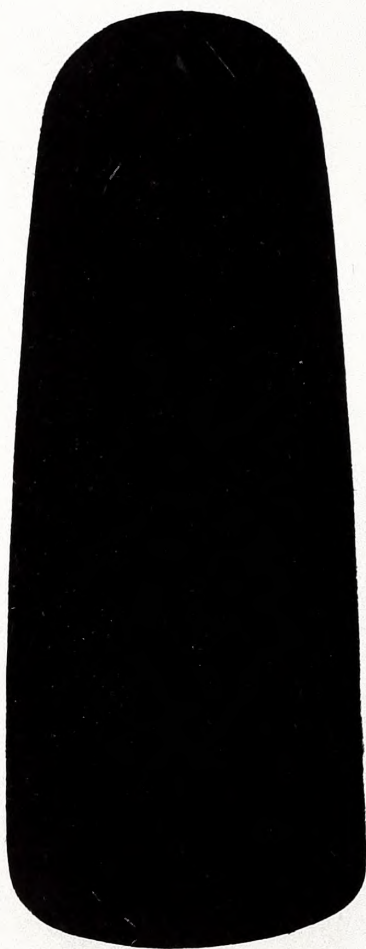
Large untitled drawings from the mid and late 1980s engender forms growing out from the shape's internal diagonal axis. These ovoid densities hold the flat space with palpable authority. Perhaps because the dynamic diagonal activates the ground, yet is buried within the image's irregular mass, the resulting drawings manifest sculptural possibility. They are certainly among the most various Highstein has so far produced.



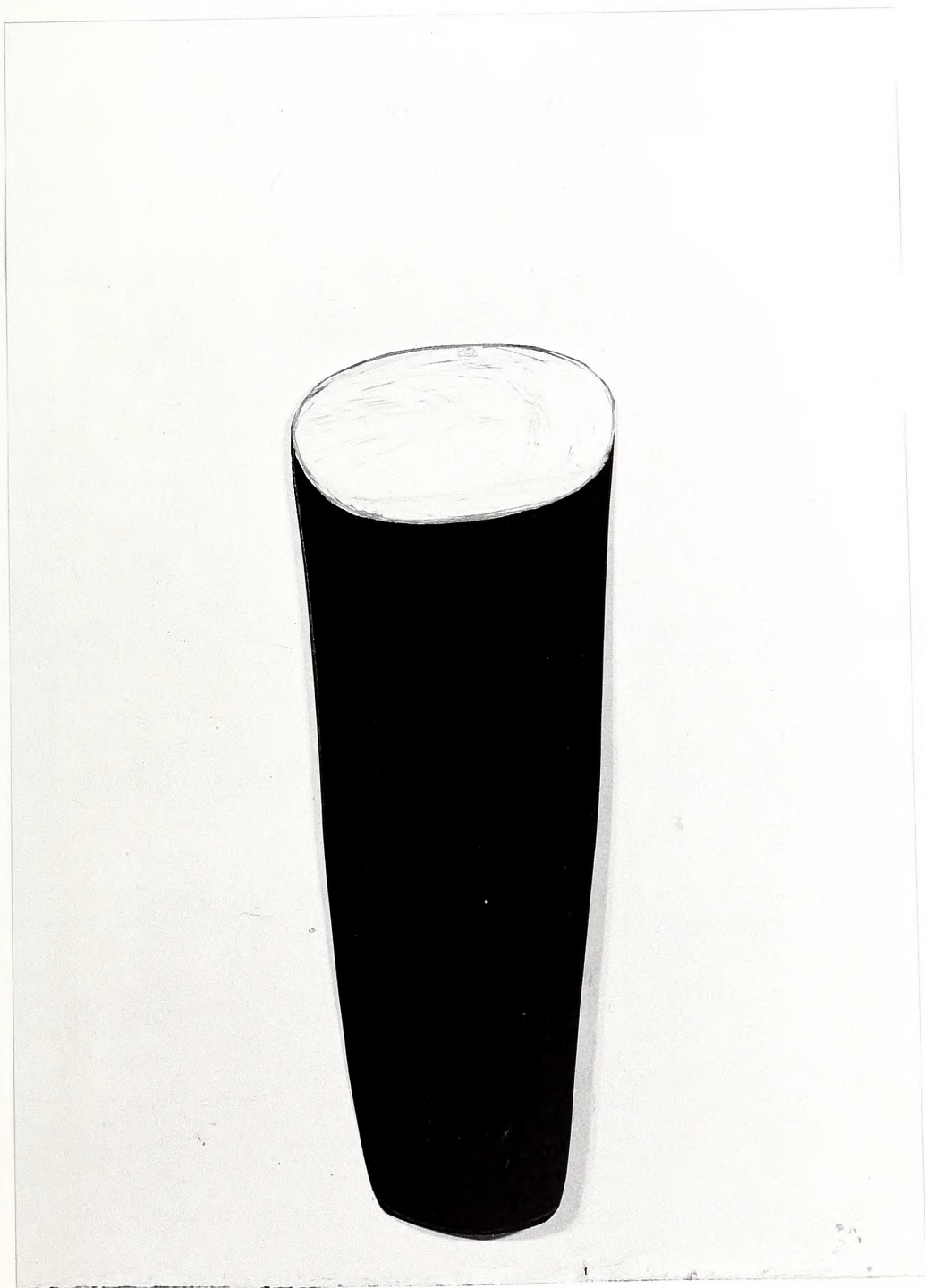
Diagonal Line Drawing, 1975

The 1990s has yielded, in Highstein's words, drawings that issue from sculpture, yet in themselves are "fantasy." For the waiting room at Grand Central Station, Highstein has projected a hollow cone large enough to walk into. Not yet built, Highstein's proposal has provoked drawings that imagine "what looking up from within the interior feels like." What it feels like to Highstein is a linear drawings in negative: All space of the page is black except for the delineated outline at the top. For a creature from Spaceland, the psycho-perceptual field seen from below may be disorienting, since viewers have acquired the habit of seeing Highstein's drawings as elevations or plans (when they see them as transcribed from reality at all). The illusionist space is, however, not so much as to seem intestinal, and indeed the most immediate impression is that of two-dimensional space, made into sensuous fact.

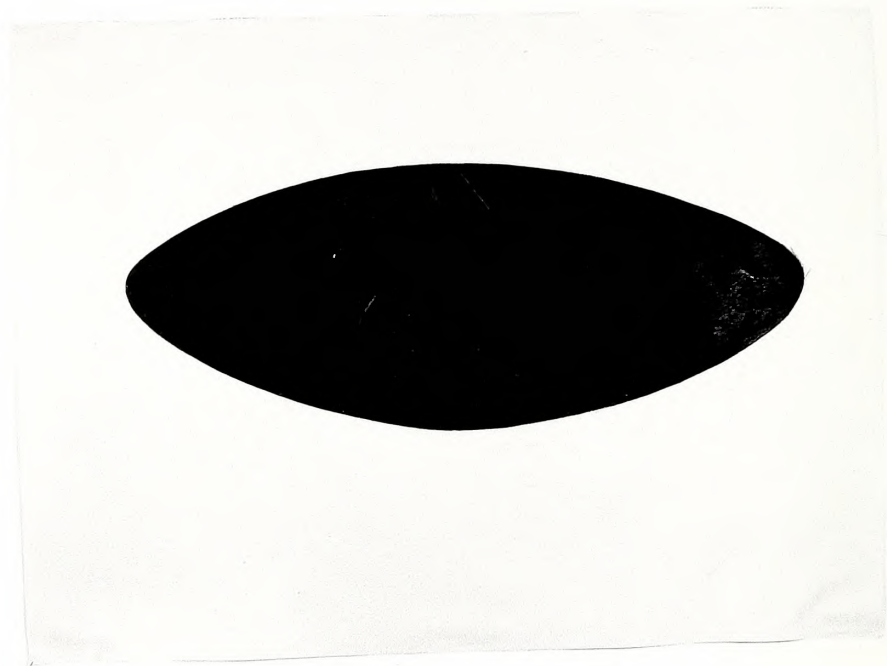
Marjorie Welish



Totem, 1979



Floor Drawing—Vessel, 1990



Flying Saucer, 1977

Checklist

All works are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

1. *Untitled*, 1973
Dry pastel on paper
30 x 40 inches
Collection of Richard Nonas,
New York
2. *Two Verticals*, 1973
Dry pastel on rag paper
50 x 62 inches
Collection of Werner H. and
Sarah-Ann Kramarsky,
New York
3. *Untitled—Double X's*, 1973
Dry pastel on paper
30 x 40 inches
Collection of Katharine Duane
Highstein, Salem, New York
4. *Diagonal Line Drawing*, 1975
Dry pastel on paper
60 x 87 inches
5. *Flying Saucer Drawing*, 1977
Dry pastel on paper
60 x 84 inches
6. *Totem*, 1979
Dry pastel on paper
50 x 38 inches
7. *Tunnel of Love*, 1979
Pastel on rice paper
35 x 32 ³/₄ inches
Collection of Katharine Duane
Highstein, Salem, New York
8. *Dome*, 1980
Painted plaster
32 x 30 x 32 inches
9. *Muffin*, 1980
Cast iron
22 x 29 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
10. *Untitled—Sphere*, 1982
Chalk and pastel on paper
38 ¹/₂ x 50 inches
11. *Untitled—Pandora*, 1985
Pencil on paper
38 ¹/₂ x 50 inches
12. *Untitled—Iron Casting*, 1986
Chalk and pastel on paper
60 x 73 inches
13. *Eccentric Shape*, 1986
Chalk on paper
50 x 38 ¹/₈ inches
14. *Flat Iron*, 1987
Bone-black pigment on paper
65 x 84 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia
15. *Untitled—Soft Triangle*, 1987
Bone-black pigment on paper
60 x 87 ¹/₂ inches
16. *Double Palm*, 1987-88
Dry pastel on paper
38 ¹/₄ x 50 inches
17. *Study for Palm III*, 1988
Pencil on paper
58 ³/₄ x 42 inches
18. *Tri-cornered Poplar Carving—
Ottoman*, 1989
Poplar
30 x 40 x 38 inches

19. *Floor Drawing—Vessel*, 1990
Bone-black pigment on paper
51 x 37 inches
20. *Iceberg*, 1990
Poplar
49 x 32 x 33 inches
21. *Small Spider Mound*, 1991
Bone-black pigment on paper
32 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches
22. *Inverted Cone*, 1991
Bone-black pigment on paper
71 1/2 x 60 1/4 inches
23. *Oracle*, 1991
Bone-black pigment on paper
74 x 59 1/2 inches
24. *Large Spider Mound*, 1991
Bone-black pigment on paper
59 3/4 x 78 3/4 inches
25. *Grotto*, 1991
Portuguese marble with steel plate
66 x 73 x 35 inches
26. *Female Figure*, 1991
Western red cedar
63 x 55 x 55 inches
27. *Cedar Tower*, 1992
Western red cedar
95 x 40 x 40 inches
28. *Model of Two-part Drawing*, 1993
Bone-black pigment on paper
60 1/2 x 72 1/2 inches
29. *Belljar*, 1993
Bronze casting
98 x 24 x 33 inches
30. *Bent Form*, 1993
Bone-black pigment on paper
69 x 60 1/2 inches
31. *Forty-foot-high Sculpture*, 1994
Bone-black pigment on paper
83 x 59 1/2 inches
32. *Atmospheric Drawing for Grand Central Terminal*, 1995
60 x 56 1/2 inches
Collection of Werner H. and Sarah-Ann Karmarsky, New York

Biography

Born 1942, Baltimore, Maryland
Lives in New York and Salem, New York

Education

Royal Academy Schools,
London, England, 1967-70
New York Studio School, 1966
University of Chicago, 1963-65
University of Maryland,
College Park, Maryland, B.A., 1963

Awards/Grants

1994 National Endowment for the Arts
1992 St. Gauden's Memorial Prize
1984 National Endowment for the Arts
1980 John Simon Guggenheim
Memorial Foundation
1979 Creative Artists Public Service
1978 National Endowment for the Arts
1976 National Endowment for the Arts
1975 Theo Doran Award, 9th Paris
Biennale

Select Solo Exhibitions

1993 Laura Carpenter Fine Art,
Santa Fe, New Mexico
Portland Museum of Art,
Portland, Oregon
ACE Contemporary Exhibition,
Los Angeles
Michael Klein, Inc., New York
Katonah Museum of Art,
Katonah, New York
1992 Galeria Comicos, Lisbon, Portugal
1991 The Phillips Collection,
Washington, D.C.
Michael Klein, Inc., New York
Art Museum of South Texas,
Corpus Christi, Texas

Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts
Forum, Santa Barbara, California
Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco
1990 Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas
Galerie Nordenhake,
Stockholm, Sweden
Galerij S65, Aalst, Belgium
1989 Brown University,
Providence, Rhode Island
The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia
Wave Hill, Bronx, New York
1986 Rose Art Museum,
Brandeis University,
Waltham, Massachusetts
La Jolla Museum of Contemporary
Art, La Jolla, California

Select Group Exhibitions

1994 "An American Landscape,"
Michael Klein, Inc., New York
1993 "Cadavre Exquie,"
The Drawing Center, New York
Scorates Sculpture Park,
Long Island City, New York
"Bienal Escultura/Desenho,"
Caldas Da Rainha, Portugal
"Differentes Natures," Galerie Art 4,
Galerie de l'Esplandade, EPAD,
Paris, France
"Material Identity: Sculpture
between Nature and Culture,"
Portland Art Museum,
Portland, Oregon
"The Second Dimension: Twentieth
Century Sculptor's Drawings,"
The Brooklyn Museum,
Brooklyn, New York
1992 "The First Decade, 1964-1974,
Works on Paper," The New York
Studio School, New York
"Benchmarks,"
Katonah Museum of Art,
Katonah, New York

- 1991 "Ten Sites, Works, Artists, Years,"
Laumier Sculpture Park,
St. Louis, Missouri
- 1990 "Let's Play House,"
The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia
"Sculptor's Drawings,"
L. A. Louver Gallery,
Venice, California
"A Natural Order: The Experience of
Landscape in Contemporary
Sculpture."
The Hudson River Museum,
Yonkers, New York
"Wanasutställningen 1990,"
Wanas Sculpture Park, Sweden
- 1989 "The Innovators: Entering into the
Sculpture," ACE Gallery,
Los Angeles
"Out of Wood: Recent Sculpture,"
Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris, New York
"The Natural Image: Nature as
Image by Forty Contemporary
Artists," Stamford Museum and
Nature Center, Connecticut
- 1988 "Ironic Abstraction,"
University Art Gallery, University of
South Florida, Tampa, Florida
"Sculpture Inside Outside,"
Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, Minnesota, traveled to
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas

Select Projects/Public Works

- Artists in Action: Brooklyn Academy of
Music, Brooklyn, New York, 1996
Laumier Sculpture Park,
St. Louis, Missouri, 1991
Mobil Oil Corporation,
Richmond, Virginia, 1991
Wanas Sculpture Park,
Wanas, Sweden, 1990
Rutgers University, New Jersey, 1990
Walker Art Center,
Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1989

Select Collections

- Baltimore Museum of Art,
Baltimore, Maryland
The Brooklyn Museum,
Brooklyn, New York
Chase Manhattan Bank, New York
Dallas Art Museum, Dallas, Texas
Detroit Institute of Arts,
Detroit, Michigan
The Mattress Factory,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Musée Pleine Aire, Paris, France
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Museum of Modern Art, New York
New Museum of Contemporary Art,
New York
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
Waltham, Massachusetts
San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art,
La Jolla, California
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York
Victoria Albert Museum, London, England
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Select Bibliography

- 1994 Princenthal, Nancy. "Reinvented
Nature." *Art in America*,
May, pp. 90-95.
- 1993 Weber, John. *Material Identity,
Sculpture between Nature and
Culture*. Portland, Oregon:
Portland Art Museum.
- 1990 Bloemink, Barbara. *A Natural Order:
The Experience of the Landscape in
Contemporary Sculpture*.
Yonkers, New York:
The Hudson River Museum.
- 1989 Gear, Josephine. *Out of Wood: Recent
Sculpture*. New York: Whitney
Museum of American Art at
Philip Morris.



Atmospheric Drawing for Grand Central Terminal, 1995

This publication accompanies the exhibition "Jene Highstein," February 10 through April 21, 1996, at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

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